Examining Tamil Nadu's Language Policy
in the context of State Policy and NEP 2020

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Abstract

This paper examines the language policy of the Tamil Nadu State Education Policy, 2025 and the National Educational Policy 2020. It would employ a descriptive and empirical research design involving an analysis of academic discourses on the Three Language Formula or Two Language Policy, along with the problems and conundrums that arise due to pragmatic considerations like linguistic diversity, teacher readiness, resource availability, employment opportunities, language ideological concerns and sociocultural attitudes towards language learning. It focuses on the stakeholders' role in fostering the mother tongue and in the preservation and maintenance of the home language that integrates culture in an inclusive learning environment. I suggest introducing translanguaging as a pedagogical strategy that can customise language policy to regional needs and implement a flexible approach serving as an educational model that aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4) of the United Nations, i.e, quality education.

Keywords: language policy; mother tongue; translanguage; education

INTRODUCTION

Language plays a critical role in shaping our perception of the world, cognitive development, cultural identity and social integration, particularly in a multilingual society like India, where many marginal linguistic communities are entrapped in a vicious cycle of disadvantage both socially and economically. It is a well-known fact that there are numerous sociolinguistic and cognitive processes behind language dominance, relative status among languages, marginalisation, exclusion, attrition, and language shift, which reflects the relationship between the neglect of language by not recognising them in the realm of education and also leading to the loss and degeneration of linguistic and cultural diversity. Stakeholders, such as linguists, teachers, researchers and policy makers, are key factors in deciding the linguistic future and landscape of a nation as they are endowed with the formidable task of integrating culture and language in an inclusive learning environment. Ajit Mohanty (2018) highlights the contrast between the overwhelming evidence that bilingualism/multilingualism confers cognitive benefits with respect to metalinguistic and metacognitive abilities, and the 'normalised' social and educational policies that deny children from impoverished and marginalised communities opportunities to develop their multilingual abilities within the context of schooling. According to him, State and National policies are generally designed to perpetuate inequality and educational disadvantage, as minority languages are not included in education policies in favour of regional and national languages, which in turn are subsequently marginalised by the former colonial language, English. In this context, it becomes crucial to evaluate the conundrum of an appropriate language policy that nurtures all languages in a multilingual nation like India. It is worth noting at this point that there are many linguists and researchers who believe in the effectiveness and the sustainability of the mother tongue-based language education programmes. Therefore, through this paper, I intend to explore the challenges related to the possibilities of a strategic synergy of the State Education Policy and National Education Policy 2020 with the fourth Sustainable Development Goal SDG4 which is quality education. This study proposes translanguaging as a flexible pedagogical strategy that can mediate between national and regional language policies while aligning language education in order to promote inclusive, equitable and quality education for speakers of all languages in India. Therefore, the scope of the study is limited to school education policies at the national level,

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with a particular focus on Tamil Nadu as a regional case.

BACKGROUND

In a country like India, people belong to varied socio-economic backgrounds, and it is the stark reality that students from relatively affluent communities enrol in English medium schools where they are typically taught by professionally trained and highly qualified teachers who have good proficiency in the English language. However, students from marginalised communities and less affluent backgrounds do not have adequate access to quality language instruction, and therefore they are denied a functional academic command of any of their home language, regional/national languages or English. Mohanty (2018, p.18 -19). Therefore, the question of implementation of a language policy becomes a Herculean task, as the repercussions of a failed language policy that does not produce the expected outcomes can only be attributed to poor decision-making and implementation of the policy.

The linguistic profile of India is confounded by the profusion of endangered languages, regional and national languages and dialects. Some of the central questions to be reflected upon in this context, according to Sridhar K.K. (1996) is that, "Have the minorities been able to exercise the basic right of being educated in their own mother tongue?" During the British rule, India, as a colony, had established English as the primary medium of instruction. Moreover, as Sridhar K.K (1996) observes that there were some debatable questions like, "What should be the medium for minority language speakers.... and for how long should English continue to be the medium at the University level." (p.334) He says that, "Consequently, after a series of reports were produced, the Central Advisory Board of Education proposed a policy, generally known as the 'Three Language Formula' which was reviewed and accepted in 1961. According to this formula, a child should study: (a) the regional language of the State; (b) Hindi in a non-Hindi area and any other Indian language in the Hindi area; (c) English or any other modern European language. The Education Commission (1964-1966) examined this formula, and further improved it by recommending a modified graduated "Three Language Formula" to include: (a) the mother tongue or the regional language; (b) the official language of the Union (Hindi) or the associate official language of the Union (English); and (c) a modern Indian or foreign language not covered under (a) and (b), and other than that used as medium of instruction."(p.334)

Conventionally, all language policies adhered to the norms of using the mother tongue in the formative stages of learning. And it is important to note that all languages do not universally accept Hindi as the official language or medium of instruction, especially in the Southern States, where English is the lingua franca. Implementation of a compulsory second language or third language invites stiff resistance, particularly from the State of Tamil Nadu, where including Hindi in the 'Three language Formula' is only seen as Hindi imposition. As Sridhar K.K. (1996) observes, "Several of them have been agitating for their rightful place in Indian socio-political, economic and education systems. While some languages have been agitating for official recognition, others for more roles and thereby more power and prestige for their language(s)." (p.334). So, the issue of language policy implementation had been a bone of contention among the States of India for many decades and with the recent development of the NEP (National Education Policy 2020) which had been designed with lofty ideals; a new Pandora's box has been reopened leading to the rise of many voices fighting for assertion of their linguistic rights, ideology and identity.

India has a practice of pluralism and multilingualism that has been the reason for supporting linguistic minorities and speakers of lesser-known languages and endangered languages to preserve and maintain their cultural distinctiveness, ethnicity and their linguistic rights, identity and roots. The English language is known as the language of economic empowerment, as it serves as a gateway to jobs and career advancement, and it has international value. The advantages of using English as the medium of instruction have led to remarkable development in areas like science, trade, commerce and medicine. Hence, language policy makers are generally apprehensive of facing criticism for not including English in the curriculum, as it is considered indispensable and also the inclusion of English as the medium of instruction has been evaluated as a pragmatic decision in many multilingual former colonial nations. "On the other hand, fear of provincialization and retrogression in an age of rapid mobility and technological innovations, plus the delay in giving official recognition to the regional languages in such domains as administration and law, contribute to the perception that the regional languages have limited value in higher education.

Thus, while the policy makers recognise the need to promote all mother tongues, several problems are encountered in its implementation." (Sridhar 1996, p.337)

Hence, though the implementation of the three language formula represents a significant step in preserving the home language, as the NEP 2020 states that, "the three language formula will continue to be implemented while keeping in mind the Constitutional provisions, aspirations of the people, regions and the Union and the need to promote multilingualism as well as to promote national unity", (Government of India, 2020, p.14); however, there has been vehement opposition, specifically from the State of Tamil Nadu which predominantly has bilingual speakers ."The NEP also states that no language will be imposed on any State and that the three languages learned by the children will be the choices of States, regions and the students themselves, of which two languages are to be native to India." (Government of India, 2020, p.14). This is a significant development in fostering the linguistic ideology and identity tied to Tamil and other local languages, and it has been lauded by many policymakers that the TLF contributes to the maintenance of local languages, thereby promoting educational equity and inclusivity. However, there are many perceived challenges and prospects of the TLF from an educator's perspective. In light of these matters, it is interesting to note that the State of Tamil Nadu has designed a State Education Policy in opposition to a National Education Policy (NEP 2020), which insists on continuing with its dual language policy of Tamil and English as the medium of instruction. Therefore, this paper would explore issues related to the constraints and implementation hurdles of multilingual education and would also help us to recognise the role and relevance of regional languages in shaping educational policies and practices and their impact on academic performances.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language policy implementation has been widely investigated, specifically against the backdrop of multilingualism and mother tongue - based education. Scholars like Harold F. Schiffman (1998) in 'Linguistic Culture and Language Policy' discuss how Tamil Nadu has shaped its unique two-language approach (Tamil & English), reflecting a strong regional identity and ideological stances against Hindi imposition. Annamalai (2001) in

'Managing Multilingualism in India: Political and Linguistic Manifestations' highlights that the Three Language Formula introduced in 1968 with the intention of promoting national integration through Hindi, English, and a regional language emphasises that its practical implementation in Tamil Nadu faced strong socio-political resistance, leading to TN's continued adherence to a two-language formula altogether. Aithal and Aithal (2019a), in their paper, 'Analysis of Higher Education in Indian National Education Policy Proposal 2019 and its Implementation Challenges', published in the 'International Journal of Applied Engineering and Management Letters', provided a detailed review of the challenges facing the higher education sector in the context of NEP 2019. In a subsequent study, Aithal and Aithal (2020b), in the 'International Journal of Management, Technology and Social Sciences', examined the 'Analysis of the Indian National Education Policy 2020' and reported on its objectives as well as the hurdles in implementing the policy, particularly in relation to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4. Similarly, Mohan (2010), in his paper on 'Minority and Majority Linguistic Groups in India: Issues and Problems', published in the 'Bulletin of the Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute', emphasised that educational activity can be strengthened by ensuring fair representation of regional languages to preserve their linguistic and cultural heritage. Deepak Kumar (2021) in his paper on, 'Journey with Rural Identity and Linguicism' in the journal titled, 'Caste: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion – Perspectives on Emancipation', extrapolates on the multiple discrimination faced by those who do not have access to education in English and how his educational journey was marred by humiliating experiences as the vernacular medium students felt inadequate due to their limited proficiency in English. He regrets the fact that most of the tribal and minority mother tongues have no place in the Indian Educational System. According to him, linguistic imperialism is exercised by the English medium pedagogy, and he insists on striving towards equitable access to education, which aligns with SDG4.

OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this study is to analyse the hurdles in implementing a language policy, which cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach, as it should be a feasible working model in the urban areas, rural regions and in schools where the medium of

instruction is predominantly the regional language, with particular distinction given to government schools and private schools. Such a discourse-based analysis is based on empirical evidence from newspapers and academic documents, which would facilitate focusing on the practical issues such as teacher training, resource availability and lack of awareness about the significance of language acquisition and various pedagogical approaches like translanguaging and mother-tongue-based multilingual education.

The next objective would be to evaluate the complexities of the language policies and to provide a flexible approach for their implementation in the language classroom while aligning with the goals of SDG4. This is particularly with an emphasis on promoting an inclusive and equitable education that provides equal access to quality education within a multilingual, multicultural and heterogeneous socio-economic context so as to meet the academic needs of students of Tamil Nadu, thereby facilitating their growth and increasing their access to education and employment opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive research design, involving an analysis of existing literature on government policies, academic discourse capturing the voices of stakeholders, reports and commentary from national and international organisations that address language in education as related to SDG4 and sources of the media that represent the political debates and societal reactions to the implementation of a language policy in India. Therefore, the primary sources of analysis are the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the Tamil Nadu State Education Policy (TNSEP) 2025, which are examined closely as authoritative policy texts shaping language-in-education discourse in India.

The analysis follows a document and content analysis approach as it focuses on contemporary perspectives while highlighting the challenges in curriculum development, teacher preparedness and equity of access. By drawing together from diverse sources, the methodology enables a critical evaluation of how language policies are conceptualised and interpreted in multilingual educational settings, mainly by triangulating close readings of the NEP 2020 and TNSEP 2025 with scholarly and public discourses, enabling an empirically informed evaluation of practical challenges of language policy implementation in a linguistically diverse context.

DISCUSSION

Language and curriculum development are integral components of achieving SDG4 (Quality Education), as they both play a crucial role in how education reaches learners and promotes equity, accessibility, and a sustainable livelihood. Language is not just a medium of instruction, but it also serves as an instrument for developing cognitive abilities, distinctive cultural identities and a linguistic ideology. Using the mother tongue has improved literacy, especially among those who cannot afford elite English-medium schools, leading to an increase in academic achievement. Cummins (2000) emphasised that children's cognitive and academic growth was fostered when their mother tongue is used as the foundation for learning, reinforcing the interdependence hypothesis between L1 and L2. Any linguist, educator, language teacher or specialist would also advocate that Chomsky's theory of language acquisition can be extended to claim that the mother tongue input provides the richest and most accessible comprehensible and meaningful data for the child's Language Acquisition Device, thus supporting stronger cognitive and linguistic skills. In India, the educational scenario has a curriculum which emphasizes English medium instruction as it is considered beneficial for placement opportunities. However, no language policy neglects the preservation or maintenance of the mother tongue, as it is a mark of one's linguistic identity. The Tamil Nadu State Education Policy, 2025 (p.26) states that according to the Tamil Learning Act of 2006, Tamil should be taught as a compulsory subject from class. I go to X in all schools of the State, irrespective of the board of affiliation, be it State Board, CBSE, ICSE or other international curricula. Implementation of this policy ensures that there is better linguistic inclusion, strengthening cultural identity and enhancing integration with the local community, thereby facilitating greater employment opportunities within the State. In this context, it is interesting to observe that a noted linguist, Rama Kant Agnihotri (2025, para 1), asks rhetorically, "Does India have a language policy? The answer is no, because the three-language formula is just that – a formula. It would be rooted in some theoretical understanding about the nature, structure and acquisition of language, its relationship to education, to the local community's funds of

knowledge and to society." Therefore, though every language policy, be it the SEP 2025 or the National Education policy 2020, or the MTB-MLE policy advocated by UNESCO, all of them share similar ideals and speak the same language, which is carving an indelible spot and domain for the mother tongue/native language in the curriculum. The conventional view of the TLF is typically seen as a combination of Tamil, Hindi and English. However, the NEP states that any two native languages can be chosen in alignment with the regional and cultural context according to the needs of the students. However, this has a lot of practical problems like lack of resources, teacher readiness, sociocultural attitudes, clash of ideologies, linguistic hierarchies and other compounding factors like illiteracy, poverty and inaccessibility to higher education, especially in the rural sector. Therefore, a key innovation is the investigation into the potential for greater linguistic flexibility in implementing any language policy, would be to allow innovative pedagogical strategies that allow a wider choice among schools in various regions to adopt other local languages or dialects that resonate with the local communities, rather than being limited to any one language for which the language teacher has to be receptive to new theories and approaches. In pedagogy, translanguaging can emphasise fluid language practices that nurture the learner's home language, while validating effective learning in formal education. According to Garcia and Wei (2014), "Translanguaging refers to the dynamic process by which multilingual speakers use their full linguistic repertoire, without strict boundaries between named languages, to make meaning, communicate and learn" Garcia, being one of the leading global voices in translanguaging advocates dynamic bilingualism, rejecting the view that languages are separate systems in the brain, radically shifting the perspectives of educators to a holistic, linguistic repertoire.

CONCLUSION:

Therefore, instead of creating a Tower of Babel-like situation, it is the responsibility of the teacher and educator to introspect on the sociolinguistic dynamics between languages and to introduce innovative pedagogical strategies that can create inclusive multilingual classrooms while maintaining the cultural integrity and identity of the mother tongue. It is obvious that every language policy envisions the promotion of equity, equitable access to education, and aspires to conquer linguistic boundaries and barriers, while simultaneously preserving one's linguistic ideology and cultural integration, thereby achieving a better, sustainable livelihood; that serves as a transformative model for the future of every individual in the nation.

It is also an undeniable fact that policy makers are attempting earnestly to make pragmatic decisions, keeping in mind that certain languages are instrumental in professional growth while other languages impact cognitive development, language acquisition and cultural identity. The findings of this study are to suggest policy adjustments that align with the ideology and best interests of the people and stakeholders, thereby creating a more flexible and regionally sensitive approach to a multilingual situation. Addressing challenges and limitations, like inadequate training for teachers, resources, and resistance to certain languages, can lead to a culturally synergistic and receptive education system that has an inclusive and regionally sensitive approach to bilingual or multilingual education, ultimately promoting social integration and access to equitable education for all. Therefore, to end on an optimistic note, I believe that the future linguistic landscape of a pluri-linguistic nation like India can be more inclusive and may provide recommendations to incorporate even endangered and lesser-known languages especially in rural areas where such speakers are more in number thereby giving them a fair representation and ensuring equity, inclusiveness and quality education for all irrespective of one's socio-economic status.

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